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Journalism credibility workshop: strategies to restore trust

Friday 9 February 2018

Report

The workshop was held as part of the evidence-gathering stage of the Truth, Trust and Technology Commission. It was designed to feed in to the Commission's report, due to be published by LSE in November 2018.

The workshop was held under the Chatham House rule. Participants included a range of experts from academia, civil society and the public and private sectors, and included senior journalists and editors, policymakers and industry representatives. This report was prepared by the LSE Truth, Trust and Technology team as a record of points raised in the discussion. It is not a verbatim summary and does not represent a consensus view, or a complete record of every matter discussed.

Background

As the barriers to publication have collapsed and the volume of news and commentary has grown, journalists and news organisations are finding their role as trusted and credible sources being challenged. During election and referendum campaigns, politicians reach out to voters directly: many no longer regard the media as an indispensable intermediary in the democratic process. Post-Leveson, the press has been unable to agree on a common system of voluntary regulation. The impartiality of the BBC has come under sustained attack from different quarters. Meanwhile, much of the media has either put up online paywalls or struggles to make its work available freely through a sustainable funding model. Journalists struggle to agree on what constitutes 'public value', or how to measure it.

The workshop

Charlie Beckett (LSE Professor and Director of the T3 Commission) introduced the workshop. Nic Newman then presented insights into the public's attitude to truth from a Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report, [Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media](#). The perception of bias and agendas are by far people's biggest concern; in an increasingly crowded market, people are unsure whom to trust. Some actively avoid the news for this reason, or because it makes them feel powerless and depressed. Meanwhile, news organisations are increasingly worried about the power of platforms and find them unreliable partners.

Will Lewis (CEO, Dow Jones) discussed the challenges facing news media and its relationship with platforms and advertisers. He talked about ways in which the Wall Street Journal has expanded its paid subscriber base and freed up greater resources for the newsroom by automating some content.

After questions, participants joined two of four breakout sessions addressing the [key questions](#) of this stream: truth, strategies to restore trust, tech giants' contribution to the news industry and their relationship with the media, and the public value of journalism.

Measuring the value of journalistic content

Journalists and editors have come to measure the worth of their content by counting page views, time spent on a site and the number of interactions a piece of content generates on social media. These metrics have been driven by the need for advertising revenue, but some participants suggested that the crisis in trust and growth of misinformation demands a new model of journalistic value. Indeed, [Center for Human Technology research](#) suggests that the apps where people spend most time are often the ones that make them most unhappy. 'Sticky' content can perpetrate social divisions. suggests that the apps where people spend most time are often the ones that make them most unhappy. 'Sticky' content can perpetrate social divisions.

How, though, can publications create a viable business model that promotes fairness and integrity rather than 'eyeballs'? Consuming a source and valuing it are not the same thing: some people may not value accuracy, preferring to use sources that reflect their worldview. Satire presents an additional challenge. With Vodafone [whitelisting](#) brands and Facebook asking users to [rank news outlets](#), it may fall to advertisers and platforms to decide who is trustworthy. While some participants thought pressure from advertisers could be helpful in encouraging platforms to be more scrupulous about hosting misinformation and hate speech, it is unlikely to directly boost good-quality journalism.

Platforms themselves are deeply uncomfortable with the task of sifting and judging news providers. (In [South Korea](#), however, Naver - a news portal analogous to Google - is distributing a \$4bn fund to more than 120 'trusted publishers' and has entered into a number of joint ventures with them.) Even for professional fact-checkers, establishing public value is tricky. Different people value different types of news; the views of family and friends are influential. Sports journalism, for example, has non-democratic value both in building interest communities and bringing in readers and viewers who might otherwise

ignore general news. If it is to hold the public's attention then journalism must (as in the Reithian model) entertain as much as it informs.

Nonetheless, one model of public value suggested by an attendee would include

- Accurate information about what is going on at a national and international level
- Local news
- Clear, evidenced analysis about social change.

Objectivity and normative notions of neutrality are important in some news organisations, but several participants thought it unrealistic to expect them of all media, particularly outside public service broadcasting. 'Nuance doesn't sell', said one attendee. Furthermore, in an increasingly polarised political landscape, the quest for neutrality – particularly for science journalists – risks legitimising loud but mendacious points of view, with fundamental inaccuracies going unchallenged. Accountability, and giving a fair hearing to opposing arguments that are based in empirical evidence, are more reasonable aspirations for most journalists.

Participants were sceptical about the ability of artificial intelligence (AI) to identify trustworthy content. [Automated fact-checking](#) was, one said, a dead end. Likewise, Facebook's plans to invite users to rank publishers according to their trustworthiness were problematic, and could kill off smaller publishers whose reputation has yet to be widely established, or who serve a niche audience. The job of fact-checking would ultimately fall to humans, and they would have to find a way to convey fair and trustworthy content in way that was at once machine-readable (and therefore capable of being incorporated into platform algorithms) but also resistant to being 'gamed' by malicious actors.

Some, however, were optimistic about the potential of AI to automate simple journalistic tasks (such as match reports and market data), thereby freeing up editorial budgets for investigative and more demanding journalism.

Paying for what you value

- Publishers have seized on platforms as a way to increase their reach and thus their advertising revenue, but this Faustian pact rebounded badly as advertising spend shifted from publications to the platforms and people deploy ad-blocking software. More than one participant was incredulous at the willingness of some media to allow 'their' communities to take root on social media rather than on their own sites, arguing that relying on Facebook to build communities is a dangerous strategy. Bringing audiences back, often into apps and potentially behind paywalls, is an obvious way to reclaim control over communities, audience data and revenue streams.

Paid-for content is clearly valued by those who buy it. Some US outlets have celebrated a '[flight to quality](#)' since Donald Trump's election as president, 'funneling' readers on a journey from free content to metered paywalls and successively deeper subscription models. But it has disadvantages:

- Segmentation and further polarisation of world views
- Less-educated audiences are already less likely to trust the news ([Bias, Bullshit and Lies](#), p10); ring-fencing better-quality content makes it the preserve of an 'elite'

- The need to keep subscribers happy can have a chilling effect on editorial freedom and innovation.

Nonetheless, the success of Netflix and Spotify shows that with the right offering, people are willing to pay for content. Publishers could learn from their personalisation techniques, audience insight and appeal to users who dislike advertising.

How can media establish their trustworthiness in a crowded market?

The sheer quantity of freely available information not only confuses people, but reduces the perceived value of individual reports. ‘Rip-off content’ (stripped from behind paywalls) was identified as a scourge that platforms could and should do more to crack down on, as YouTube has largely done with music, thanks to the threat of copyright suits.

Participants identified greater **transparency** from media companies and journalists about their working methods as vital in creating and maintaining trust and (importantly for revenues) loyalty. Fact-checking systems would not be enough when UK audiences are deeply sceptical of the agendas and perceived biases of media organisations. Some argued it would only be possible to expose readers to content they were likely to disagree with if they trusted the outlet delivering it.

Attendees discussed a number of areas where more openness (about editorial policy) and transparency (about ownership, funding and institutional allegiances) were needed:

- ‘Nothing which a good journalist does should be hidden’ ... ‘take your audience on your journey with you’. Reporters should explain how they got their story and their working processes – though one participant warned of the risk of ‘news with footnotes’ and the difficulty of getting users to care.
- As part of this, audiences should be able to understand the steps journalists had taken to verify a story, including (where possible) their sources and by linking to online sources, and how they had treated the subjects fairly.
- Labelling news and comment clearly: ‘Mark Zuckerberg has yet to understand the difference.’ On mobile the distinction is particularly difficult to make. The Guardian, for instance, now identifies comment on social media feeds with a corner icon added to pictures. One participant complained that ‘lower standards of truth’ applied to comment, even at more reputable organisations. At Dow Jones an internal ethics committee polices the distinction.
- Making it clear when content is sponsored (‘sponcon’). This is particularly important for science journalism and content with a bearing on public policy.
- Establishing journalists’ credentials so that audiences understand why they have been chosen to cover or comment on a story. Conversely, if an organisation (like the Economist) does not use bylines, explaining why this is so.
- Being clear about biases, values and their relationship to other news brands. The Wall Street Journal’s [‘red feed/blue feed’](#) experiment with juxtaposing conservative and liberal Facebook news feeds was cited, although some worried about overly binary approaches to political allegiance.

- Explaining how personalisation of content works. While it can be a useful tool, people do not necessarily understand why they are not seeing ‘the whole picture’.

Likewise, platforms were urged to be more transparent about their algorithms, despite the commercial risks associated with doing so. It might be possible to allay these concerns by disclosing commercially sensitive data to a regulator. Publishers also want to know how platforms intend to identify ‘quality’ news and content, and to do more to flag the difference between news and comment. Abandoned experiments like the one involving Facebook Live, where publishers were paid to produce live video, have sown mistrust from publishers. On the other hand, Google’s decision to abandon ‘First Click Free’, which had shut out paywalled sites from the top of search results, was welcomed by one attendee: ‘This is a crisis of distribution – stop treating all news equally’ - outlets that invest in better-quality journalism should not be penalised by search engines because they charge for content.

Platforms should also make it clearer what rights people have over their personal data. One attendee suggested this might empower people to join together to exert useful pressure on platforms – perhaps as proposed by the emerging ‘[data as labour](#)’ movement. In this model (developed by [Ibarra, Goff et al.](#)), some users would no longer give away their data freely, but negotiate with free-to-use services about how it was collected and used in order to pay for the service.

Participants noted that while the public is increasingly mistrustful, a healthy degree of scepticism is important, not least because it can encourage people to be wary of overly simplistic political agendas. Popular scepticism of ‘elites’ can be a good thing.

Several participants spoke of the importance of brands, and the loyalty they engender, in helping people make sense of the news market. People value:

- **‘Solutions-based’ and constructive journalism.** People find the news depressing and therefore sometimes avoid it. Adopting a less negative tone, and potentially explaining how people can get involved in helping to solve a problem, is a strategy that appeals especially to millennials.
- **The BBC’s ability to eschew market logic in its editorial decisions** – an advantage also enjoyed by some much less well-known non-profits and charities, such as [openDemocracy](#) or [FullFact](#).
- **A plurality of voices available at the same outlet**, mimicking the sense of completeness that the viewers of a TV news bulletin or readers of a newspaper often enjoy.

What about regulation?

For all the asymmetric power relationship between publishers and platforms, many attendees were sceptical about trying to regulate it and crush innovation in a relationship that was still ‘in flux’. Given the degree of public cynicism about the motives of both politicians and the media, one participant warned regulation – if it worked to the disadvantage of smaller players or new entrants - could be perceived as an ‘Establishment stitch-up’ designed to stifle dissenting views.

Attendees disagreed about whether it was important to distinguish between publishers and platforms as content producers. Some thought this was a vital way to establish who owned content. Others regarded the distinction as a red herring. The possibility that platforms might one day acquire legacy media was

raised, though some thought they had every interest in eschewing news and the potential legal liabilities it brought.

More appealing, for some attendees, was a 'green tick' for publishers who met the [eight Trust Indicators](#) for the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics' [Trust Project](#) (though this suggestion was rejected in the subsequent Commission workshop on platform responsibility). Germany's NetzDG law, which fines platforms if they do not remove hate speech and misinformation promptly, was also proposed as a practical alternative to regulating platforms.

Key points to take forward

- How can we challenge the news industry's dependence on 'eyeballs' as an index of value?
- What revenue models would ensure everyone can still access high-quality journalism?
- What would prompt news organisations to be more open and transparent about their working practices, revenue sources and ownership?
- Do we need to reconsider what 'balance' means in evidence-based journalism?
- How do we make readers and viewers feel more empowered to act upon the news?
- Are 'quality indicators' a good way to inspire trust? If so, who should the arbiters be?

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